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ABSTRACT

The divisions between social psychology, naive psychology, and folklore are fundamentally artifical ones. It is argued that all three have many of the same goals--that is, the prediction and control of behavior and the comprehension of the orderly processes of everyday life. Each attempts to understand how social intercourse is to proceed. Counter-intuitive theories in social psychology often on examination seem more complex than originally thought; these complexities could have been predicted from an understanding of naive psychology. A consideration of folklore and naive psychology can help the social psychologist expand, modify, and correct the theoretical perspectives of the discipline. (Author)

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SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, NAIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND FOLKLORE: ALL TOGETHER NOW?

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Social Psychology, Naive Psychology, and Folklore

Graduate students in social psychology endlessly discuss whether their chosen discipline has made any advances that can legitimately be considered non-discoverable through properties of an Everyman's common sense. Is social psychology therefore merely a sub-discipline of what William McGuire has termed "Bubba Psychology"--that which your grandmother could have told you--had you only bothered to ask? In other words, is social psychology identical, or at least very similar, to naive psychology?

This argument has a way of placing social psychology on the defensive, since the presupposition is that if it is grounded in common sense it must therefore be trivial. In this address I shall speak to some of the issues involved in the peculiar position of social psychology as a repository for organized folk wisdom, and of folklore as a spawning ground for new and challenging social psychology.

Folklore, it must be noted, covers a wide range of phenomena--it does not consist solely of children's stories and home remedies. The appropriate definition of folklore has been a thorny scholarly issue that we have not the time to comment on here--listeners are directed to the rather lengthy folkloric literature on the subject. Let it suffice to say that folklore is the sum total of a community's knowledge, passed through the group primarily by means of oral transmission. This notion of folklore is broader than some others. But basically it is agreed that folklore is the study of traditional material--including ideas and the way in which these ideas are expressed--through proverbs, superstitions, traditional jokes, legends, and many other forms. They indicate that folk ideas are units of a society's whole worldview, a concept suggested by folklorist Alan Dundes. This worldview is where much of the social psychology of

Everyman is to be discovered.

It is apparent to those who observe how people actually think and behave that every person is his (or her) own psychologist--adept at employing rule-governed techniques for influencing the behavior of others in order to get their own way. For example, the process of equal exchange--or at least "fair exchange" is known to and practiced by children long before they are able to read--much less read the works of Homans and of Thibaut and Kelley. Nor do they need to be told that exchange need not occur in kind, but may involve different commodities, as recently suggested by Foa and Foa.

This is not to suggest that this "obviousness" makes social psychological theorizing any less valid. Our argument is that social psychology, naive psychology, and folklore have many of the same goals--the prediction and control of human behavior, and the comprehension of the orderly processes of everyday life. Further, there are and should be symbiotic relationships among these three approaches. Each informs the other for their different, although overlapping, purposes. Social psychology is concerned with the understanding of the systematic regularities of social life; naive psychology is in some sense the individual's experienced social psychology--concerned with the ways in which one can survive and flourish most effectively, and folklore is concerned with the community's rules for appropriate behavior and attitudes, as exemplified in past episodes and traditions. All deal with an understanding of how social intercourse is to proceed.

For the professional social psychologist, theories are often derived from one of the other approaches--his own naive psychology being one clear example--occasionally cited in scholarly articles. If a scholarly theory seems contrary to popular conceptions--in other words counter-intuitive, it often means that the counter-intuitive theory has more complications

than originally thought. Such a case might be the classic counter-intuitive theory in social psychology--Dissonance Theory. In the course of nearly two decades since it was originally proposed, it has been found inadequate to cover all circumstances effectively and in addition is not as counter-intuitive as is sometimes maintained--viz., all the secret societies that require, quite intentionally, a severe initiation for membership.

A consideration of folklore and naive psychology can help the social psychologist expand, modify, and correct the theoretical perspectives of the discipline. The goal of achieving counter-intuitive predictions as the true test of social psychology's scientific validity seems to be a false goal, and one which only implies one's lack of faith in humanity. What social psychology does have which the other approaches do not, are three elements. First, there is a desire to systematize research--to develop theories which are applicable in many situations--which on their surface seem quite disparate. In social psychology there is a greater desire to stress situational importance rather than dispositional similarities of individuals across situations (social psychologists discuss, for example, situations in which trust appears, rather than to rely solely on the maxim that "there is a sucker born every minute"). Second, social psychology allows one to test hypotheses cross-culturally, and not restrict them to the culture in which they are embedded. The universality of a hypothesis can be tested by social psychologists. Third, a social psychologist, through experimentation is able to subject hypotheses to empirical tests, thus to allow for some resolution of certain causal factors involved. Often the chain of cause-and-effect is tied extremely tightly, and it is almost impossible, except in the sometimes artifical laboratory situation, to extract the two elements. Thus, we are not arguing that social psychology is or should be synonymous with these two

other approaches.

The concept of a Folk Psychology has been with us for a long time. Wilhelm Wundt in his classic work points to the long history of the field of folk psychology, a concept with different meanings at different times. Usually the term refers to the psychological understanding of the thought processes of primitive peoples, or the development of primitive thought processes--a topic that was of considerable interest during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, as exemplified by the works of Wundt, Maratt, Clodd, and Levi-Bruhl. Fritz Heider, in some sense striving for the creation of a folk psychology, used the term naive psychology--a term which despite its somewhat elitist overtones, did serve to distinguish it from the approach earlier employed by the anthropologists. Heider was interested in the psychological theories used by people to explain events, rather than psychological theories used to describe or understand "the people." Despite Heider's comments on the importance of understanding the common-sense rules by which people live, his work reveals little of the data that he seems to desire, and his terminology seems determinedly technical.

More recently, others have attempted to analyze common sense psychologies of the world--particularly in attempting to understand children's views of their worlds. Finley and Humphreys follow Heider in attempting to discover techniques used by girls between the ages of five and nine to persuade parents or friends to let them have their own way. I've studied the same topic among twelve-year old boys, and Goodchilds, Quadrado, and Raven have extended this technique to understand sex-role differences in social influence strategies. None of these have yet used their results as the basis for further theorizing on the nature of proper social influence.

It is this element which needs to be expanded--that is the development

of further theory from naive psychology and from folklore. Let us at this point take an example. One area in which these folk approaches can shed light upon social psychological theorizing is in the area of reference groups and social comparison theory. Many proverbs and stories, and "folk" psychological theorizing can be seen to attest to the validity of these approaches. For example, keeping up with the Joneses. Or take the phrase that like attracts like, or that birds of a feather flock together, or water rises to its own level. These proverbs carry certain of the same implications as reference group theory. Likewise, if one asks people how well they feel they are doing--economically or socially--often they will propose something rather similar to this social psychological notion. People will say that they do not compare themselves with those who are much higher or lower than themselves in terms of their socio-economic level, but with those who are similar. I recently studied two suburban Little League baseball teams in depth; players there told me again and again that they evaluated themselves by the criterion of how others were playing. Successful team players compared themselves with others who shared some measure of their own success. Older children compared themselves with other older children. One astute youngster proposed that friendships tended to be formed, maintained, and even broken on the quality of one's athletic ability. If two players who once were approximately equally able became different in ability, he claimed, then their friendship would likely falter--a clear and fascinating testable hypothesis, which to my knowledge has never been empirically confirmed; though it seemed valid once I began looking for evidence to support or refute it.

The example presented has been chosen with no particular axe to grind; numerous social psychological theories might have been chosen to illustrate this point that we can learn by listening to those who have

not labored in the vineyards of academic psychology.

One of the most exciting elements about the discipline of social psychology is precisely this--that it is not esoteric--that people do maintain what we demurely describe as "naive" theories to explain the behavior of others. These explanations are more than merely quaint, they are also functional, and no doubt largely correct, if we ignore their lack of complexity--perhaps a lack of person by situation interaction.

But one would suspect that even this theoretical complexity would probably be present, if unstated, if one pressed vigorously enough. The folklore of a group and the naive psychology of an individual are fascinating starting points for an externally and ecologically valid theory of social psychology, and it is disappointing that these sources of data have been so poorly used until now. Let us resolve never to ignore our fellow man and his understanding of the ways of the world; let us not ignore our culture--and others--and let us obtain through folklore a consensual judgement of what a society believes is important and worth preserving.

Many social psychologists--myself included--have complained about the disturbing lack of theory we find in our discipline, but it is there--out there. Our public has the basis from which we can start or continue the difficult work of achieving a meaningful and newly invigorated set of social psychological theories. They knew about cognitive dissonance, they understand equity theory, they can report to us not only the content of an implicit personality theory but the reasons for it as well. But in our haste for laboratory control, in our haste for professionalism, and perhaps even in our haste to publish: We forgot to ask. Let us never forget again.